

Who's got a question about elections in Santa Clara?

Q: Does my vote count?

Yes! Yes! Yes! There have been several instances where the gap between the winning and losing candidates came down to a handful of votes. In Vallejo's mayoral election last fall, only three votes separated the two contenders. And California was admitted into the United States in 1850 by a one vote margin! Every vote counts. Every vote matters. Every vote can make a difference.

Q: What does "non-partisan" mean?

Elected offices in cities are not tied to political parties as they are in state or national elections. Candidates are not required to state their political party affiliation, but they are free to seek endorsements from a political party if they choose. Political parties and special interest groups will often identify candidates in local government races they prefer.

Q: What is the value of an endorsement?

Candidates can spend a lot of time in seeking endorsements in the hopes that voters will feel more confident about a candidate who has been endorsed by an individual, group or newspaper they know and respect. It is up to each voter to determine if an endorsement has value in selecting which candidate to support.

Q: What are slate mailers?

There are two types of "slates," and each is quite different. Occasionally, candidates with similar positions will campaign and produce materials together, sharing costs. That is one type of slate. More frequently, the slate mailers voters receive during election season list recommended candidates for a variety of elected positions in the region or statewide. These mailers are published by organizations that may represent a special interest, political party, or value system. In most cases, candidates are invited to purchase space on this type of slate mailer, on a first-come, first-included basis.

Q: Do City employees get involved in campaigns?

It is not only unethical, it is illegal for City employees to use City time or resources to support a candidate for political office. City staff members are careful to treat all candidates equally, providing the same access to information to all. City workers may not appear in candidate advertisements or campaign for candidates wearing their uniforms or City identification. City employees have the right as citizens to personally support the candidates of their choice, but only on their own time and with personal funds.

Q: What "teeth" does the ethics program have to make candidates and their supporters be accountable for their actions?

Voters have the absolute power to make accountability the highest priority for candidates. If candidates see that voters will only cast their ballots for candidates who demonstrate their values by running honest, responsible campaigns, that is all the "teeth" the ethics program needs to be effective. The City cannot discipline candidates for unethical campaign practices, but voters can by passing over those candidates who don't fight fairly.

Running for office costs money... where does the \$\$\$ come from?

Every candidate for public office in California is required to file periodic campaign disclosure statements that list personal financial information and sources of campaign contributions. Any contribution of \$100 or more must include the name, address and employer of the contributor. This allows voters to see who is financially supporting which candidates.

Santa Clara candidates are invited to participate in a voluntary campaign expenditure limit. In 2008, this amount is \$29,889 total for a campaign. If the candidate agrees to stay within the limit, the City pays half of the approximate \$2,000 cost of the candidate's statement of qualifications printed in the ballot pamphlet. Participating candidates may also accept contributions from a single source of up to \$500, compared to the \$250 maximum from a single source for candidates who do not agree to limit their campaign expenditures.

For information on which candidates are participating in the voluntary expenditure limit, and the campaign disclosure statements of all candidates, go to the website www.SantaClaraCampaignDollars.org.

Read campaign mailers carefully to find their source, judge their content

Many brochures that "endorse" a variety of candidates for different offices are actually paid-for advertising by the candidates themselves.

The group that appears to be mailing the piece usually has a vague name that references family values, public safety, education, the environment, or even a political party. There is nothing wrong with candidates using some of their campaign funds to be part of a co-op mailing with other candidates, but many of these mailers are confusing to voters. Reading the small type will tell a voter a more complete story.

Any individual or organization can send a political mailer or place an advertisement about a candidate, without the candidate's knowledge or approval.

These efforts do not count in the candidate's reporting of how much money was spent on the campaign. This type of political marketing is called an "Independent expenditure" and its purpose has been to uphold the Constitutional guarantee of free speech while encouraging an active public dialogue about candidates and issues. Requirements that candidates and their campaign workers be totally uninvolved in these efforts are strictly enforced. Unfortunately, independent expenditures have sometimes become vehicles for nasty or misleading "hit" pieces on a candidate's opponent. Reading the small type will help a voter identify the true source and purpose of each campaign piece.

Most candidates create a committee name to accept contributions.

Often, these committees have names like "Committee to elect ..." or "Friends of ..." The candidate is issued a campaign identity number by the California State Fair Political Practices Commission. Campaign mailers must include the committee name, address, and, preferably, the identity number. Voters can contact the FPPC (see page 4) to clarify who is behind the committee and whether it is controlled by the candidate or another group.

"Bad officials are elected by good citizens who do not vote."

George Jean Nathan
American journalist
1882-1958



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